Learned helplessness occurs when one psychologically convinces themselves that they are not able to change or avoid a particular situation in which they find themselves. This occurs when a person is in a bad situation over and over again and can’t seem to improve things. Instead of being optimistic about the situation, the individual internalizes the helplessness they feel. That feeling becomes excessive, and undermines their motivation and self-esteem, which causes them to believe that they are victims of every situation they are in, and incapable of changing the negative situation.

For instance, a student in school may have performed poorly in a particularly difficult class, getting low test grades and a poor overall grade. Although the student may have done the best he could, the result was not satisfactory. That student may internalize that helpless feeling of not being good enough to get a better grade, and instead of thinking that it may have been that it was just a difficult class; the student may train himself to feel that he isn’t smart enough. Therefore, he may not work hard in future classes based on his assumption that he will do poorly no matter what. Their self-esteem and motivation to try is gone.

In a relationship, for example, a woman’s partner has physically or verbally abused her, and over time she may begin to feel so helpless in her situation and unable to remove herself from it that she begins to feel that there is no hope for her. Although she may get out of the situation at some point, she may get into another abusive relationship. Instead of ending the new abusive relationship, her learned helplessness causes her to believe that maybe she deserves the abuse and that there is no hope, and she isn’t strong enough to get out.

In taking care of health, one may be overweight, and have tried numerous dieting techniques which have failed. She believes there is no way to lose the weight, and that nothing will ever work to get the extra weight off. She begins to become even more lax with his or her eating habits, doesn’t exercise regularly, and accepts the life of low self-esteem that being overweight has led to. These are all examples of learned helplessness where someone has convinced themselves that being able to take control of a situation is out of their hands, and is an impossible feat, when in reality it is only a matter of psychological conditioning which has caused severe low self-esteem and depression.